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Advancing Leadership in Public Healthcare: Beyond Crowded Hospitals and Labour Shortfalls

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An ageing population, coupled with an expanding demand for healthcare, should be music to the ears of those who run hospitals, clinics, care centres and pharmacies. Yet, the sentiments expressed at a discussion that followed the [SMU-SingHealth Graduate Diploma in Healthcare Management and Leadership](#) graduation ceremony did not appear to reflect the above.

These issues were debated by four public healthcare leaders during a panel at Singapore Management University moderated by [Annie Koh](#), associate professor of finance, vice president of business development and external relations.

Foo Hee Jug, chief executive of [Jurong Health](#), believes that "human capital" poses the greatest challenge to the industry. Besides the fact that more doctors are flocking to private practice, the establishment of the [Regional Health Systems](#) means that public hospitals are tasked with looking after the healthcare needs of specific geographical zones in addition to their existing mandates.

He said: "We need new skills and approaches. How do you influence people in the community that you have no direct control over? How do you build trust with the community's stakeholders? And

how do we do all of this in the context of staff that we do not yet have (while) talents are in increasingly short supply in this marketplace?"

T.K. Udairam, Group CEO of [Eastern Health Alliance](#), agreed with the challenges raised by Foo, confirming that it is difficult to convince people who do not report to you to do what you want them to do: "How do you get all the people at nursing homes, day care centres, hospitals, and everyone else to work together so that you can deliver? How do you get the public, who are not your patients, to take control of their lives?" Commenting on the talent shortage, he added: "Every institution grapples with this issue; the inability for us to plan in a farsighted manner because we're always reacting to what's happening with our talent pool."

The talent haemorrhage

"There are a few problems causing the haemorrhage here," said Soo Khee Chee, Deputy CEO at [SingHealth](#), and Vice Dean at Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School Singapore. "Singapore is expensive for the younger generation who, because of that, feel like they have to make money and catch up," he said. Perhaps public healthcare providers should pay 'fairer' wages to match or exceed the private sector. After all, many jobs in the Singapore civil service are benchmarked with their free market equivalents.

However, Foo is not convinced that paying more is the answer, as there are other factors involved. He said: "If doctors are leaving the public sector for the private sector because of money, I think there's very little we can do about it." Public ethos and values are important, but unfortunately, these are sometimes seen as a function of money, Foo noted. Instead of only focusing on the monetary worth of a job, employees should consider the benefits and advantages that the public sector can provide, including research and teaching opportunities.

Udairam shared that his recruitment philosophy is to bring on board talent who possess the values that he sees as essential to growth. "I see the need for a transition from 'individual talent' to 'team talent' because today, hospitals are expected to "bring resources around patients, be it multidisciplinary or integrated care," he said. It is no longer enough to simply be competent at serving functions. Staff and new recruits have to be willing to embrace all of the changes occurring around the public healthcare system, Udairam added.

Ultimately, people want to work with people whom they respect and perceive as good leaders. Tan Ser Kiat, Chairman of [SingHealth Foundation](#) and Emeritus Consultant at Singapore General Hospital, and keynote speaker for the panel, pointed out that the leaders themselves play a significant role in the equation. The public healthcare sector needs more articulate leaders who are "brave, visionary, but yet humble and ready to move the ground; to be a role model". They should also possess attributes such as courage, transparency, honesty and integrity.

Quoting former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell's view on leadership, Tan said: "The day people stop bringing their problems to you is the day you stop leading them. They have either lost confidence in your ability to help, or they have concluded that you do not bother or do not care." Resolving the public healthcare sector's continuing challenges will be up to its leaders.